

AUSTRALIAN GUNNER OBITUARY RESOURCE

Colonel Lachlan Armstrong Thomson, AM

By Major General J P Stevens AO (Retd)

Colonel Lachlan Armstrong (Lachie) Thomson (Retired), Battery Commander of the 105th Field Battery RAA during its tour of duty in South Vietnam in 1969-70, passed away on 28 May 2019 age 85. He is survived by his wife, Pat, daughters Amy and Emily and son Alec.

Lachie was born in 1933 and grew up as an only child at 'Onepa', a large property shared by his uncles and his late father, near Tibooburra. He attended the local catholic school, where he received early piano tuition from the nuns. For his secondary schooling, Lachie boarded at Brighton Grammar in Melbourne where he was a house prefect, a CSM in the Cadet Corps, and a member of the school cricket, football and athletics teams.

He entered the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in 1952, and was soon known for his musical ability, becoming a leading light in the 'Steamboat Stompers' jazz group, taking the ensemble in 1954 to the Sydney Jazz Convention. He also played in the College's Australian Rules and cricket teams.

After graduation at the end of 1955, Lachie attended a Young Officer's Course at the School of Artillery before being posted to the 14th and then the 20th National Service Training Battalions at Puckapunyal. Here he instructed recruits under the scheme operating until the early 1960s that required three months of full time and then two years of Reserve service. Lachie then spent a year at 111th Anti-Aircraft battery before nearly two years on the cadre staff of the Reserve 11th Anti-Aircraft Battery and 11th Field Regiment in Brisbane.

His next posting took him to the Military Planning Staff of the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in Thailand, a country to which he would return many times. Subsequent to this appointment he joined 4th Field Regiment at Wacol. His musical interests and influence undimmed, he returned to a mess function one evening, to everyone's delight, with Acker Bilk and his band. After 4th Regiment, Lachie served for a year in 21st Anti-Aircraft Battery before spending two years at the School of Languages mastering Thai, and then a year at the Australian Staff College.

Command of the 105th Field Battery at Enoggera followed Staff College. Lachie spent 1968 assembling and guiding the training of the battery before it deployed to Vietnam in 1969. He had a light touch, carefully selecting key personnel and allowing them to get their teams up to standard, supervising and intervening when necessary. Socially, he cut a dashing figure in his Porsche.

Lachie's methods prepared the battery well for Vietnam, where his duties required him to live separated from the guns, providing advice and coordinating fire support in the headquarters of the supported battalion. He was, nonetheless, a constant presence on the radio nets and a frequent visitor to the gun position, inspecting, encouraging and chiding as required. His musical activities were set to one side, except perhaps on Christmas Eve 1969, when in the Battery Officers' and Sergeants' Mess he commandeered the Padre's portable electric organ and led a rousing sing along of Christmas carols. His battery performed well, firing a record number of rounds in support of the battalion and the wider Task Force, including at the Battle of Binh Ba in June 1969. For his leadership, Lachie was Mentioned in Despatches.

This was Lachie's last Artillery posting. After returning to Australia in February 1970, he spent a year on the staff before being posted to the SEATO Planning Office in Thailand for two years. Five years after that posting finished, following staff appointments in Melbourne and attendance at Joint Services Staff College, he went back to Thailand for

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another two years, this time as the Defence Attaché. A posting to the Reserve Headquarters in Melbourne followed, before his final military appointment, once again as Defence Attaché in Thailand, this time for five years. In the Queen's Birthday Honours in 1988, he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for his service in Bangkok.

Lachie retired from the Army in May 1990. Throughout his military service he had continued an imposing musical career and become, in the words of a Classmate, "a regular performer with his bands and pick-up groups", including, "his little-known association with his most famous duettist, the then King of Thailand, a noted tenor saxophonist". Other Gunners remember Lachie playing in jazz groups down at Lorne, and later at the Bangkok Sports Club. In Albury in 1976, one picked up a local paper to read that 'Acker Bilk protégé and master Clarinettist, Lachie Thomson was performing with the well-known Varsity Five Plus One Jazz Band for a one-night show at the city's entertainment centre.' The same article reported that 'Lachie also plays Alto Sax in the New Whispering Gold Orchestra of Australia's leading Jazz musicians.'

These musical interests continued in retirement, as did Lachie's love of Thailand, to which he returned almost annually for many years during the Brisbane summer. He also maintained his links with those he had led in Vietnam, joining the 105th Field Battery Association on its formation, attending many of the reunions, providing advice, and serving as patron for a period. He marched on Anzac Day, occasionally hosting dinners afterwards, which sometimes lasted the whole night. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Battle at Binh Ba in 1994, he arranged a commemoration in Brisbane and suggested it should be repeated annually, an arrangement given effect by the late Colonel Arthur Burke. Lachie led the battery contingent to the national Binh Ba commemorations in 2009, but, unfortunately, passed away just before the fiftieth anniversary ceremonies this year.

Vale Lachie Thomson – family man, Gunner, mentor, musician and linguist.